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ABSTRACT

One of a series of instructional booklets designed to introduce adult education program planners to the basic concepts integral to and alternative strategies for conducting needs assessments, this instructional booklet deals with determining what information to collect when conducting a needs assessment. Described first is the relationship of the process of determining what information to collect to the entire needs assessment process. Next, concepts and processes for determining educational program goal categories are examined. Following a discussion of the concept of goal, a procedure is set forth for developing relevant goals for needs assessments. Examined next are activities designed to yield comprehensive and sensitive measures for needs assessments. (MN)

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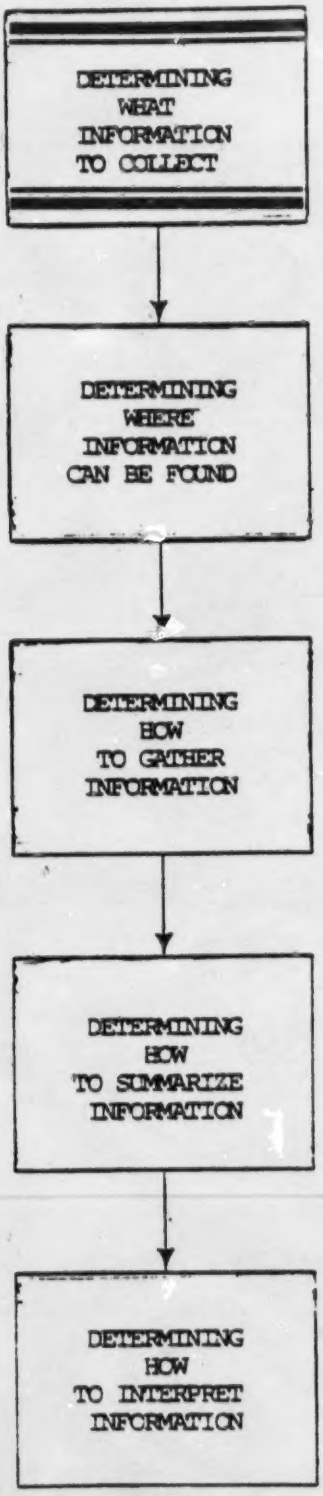
AN INTRODUCTION TO NEEDS ASSESSMENT

Special Community Service
and Continuing Education
Project.

Final Report.


DETERMINING WHAT INFORMATION TO COLLECT
DETERMINING WHERE INFORMATION CAN BE FOUND
DETERMINING HOW TO GATHER INFORMATION
DETERMINING HOW TO SUMMARIZE INFORMATION
DETERMINING HOW TO INTERPRET INFORMATION

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DETERMINING

WHAT

INFORMATION TO COLLECT

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SERIES PREFACE

This instructional booklet is one of a series prepared by the Special Community Service and Continuing Education staff at Texas A&M University. Its purpose is to introduce a diverse body of adult education program planners to basic concepts integral to and alternative strategies appropriate for conducting needs assessments. A broad base of research and information relevant to practice has been tapped in the development of the series.

This series is not in its final form but is rather "in development" as prepared for one-on-one testing in conjunction with a collection of adult education practitioners. Refinements are to be made subsequent to one-on-one, small group and field testing.

Recognition is given to those agencies and individuals who have contributed to the development of this series:

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BOOKLET ONE

DETERMINING WHAT INFORMATION TO COLLECT

Introduction

Analogy

This booklet is not unlike taking pictures. It should appeal to the amateur and the not-so-amateur photographer in all of us. Can you see yourself riding along a great Texas highway and being caught by a beautiful display of wildflowers? You stop the car, and because you are struck with the scene, you reach for your handy camera. What do you do first? Typically, you will try to catch just the picture that will have the most meaning for you. Do you want the cloud-filled sky, the mesquite and brahmans included in the picture? Or, do you want a scene of the weather-worn restraining fence and windmill facing toward the sunset? After you decide on which vista is the most appropriate, you will want to focus in and make sure you include all of the elements that made your initial decision so appealing to you. You will want to include all of those features which make the wildflower scene a quality scene for you. Then, the instant click and forever—or almost forever—you have caught it. It is important that those elements which are most precious to you are clear and discernable once the process of developing the colored film has been completed. Aha! You have done it! You can see the various hues of color in the sky; the differences in the

moods of the overhanging clouds; the patch of hundreds of bluebonnets and Indian paint brushes, which form a perfect backdrop for a soft and perfect intermingling of a single paintbrush and bluebonnet, so perfect you can almost smell them. You are even sure that you can smell and hear the brahmans contentedly chewing.

You have moved from scope, through focus, to measurement in a process that is replicated each day a million times over by each one of us. It is this same process that we are anxious to help you recreate during your needs assessment activities as the basis for your educational programming. We want to help you capture something meaningful by carefully identifying the scope for your study, getting a good focus, and then capturing it in great detail, replicated for future reference.

Purpose and Content

Many folks just like you are faced with the prospect and responsibility of building educational programs for adults. You may be in the process of exploring new missions for your institutions, determining future programming options, prioritizing existing missions, analyzing your adequacy in meeting existing missions, identifying new or inadequately served client groups, or diagnosing problems in program implementation. These undertakings are often highly intuitive and creative processes, which at times defy analysis.

To complement these processes, we propose that you begin the program planning process with a needs assessment designed to help you deal systematically with the critical questions and decisions which ought to be addressed before any program development begins.

It is the purpose of this booklet to help you determine the scope,

focus and measures of your needs assessment undertaking; to help you determine what information you want to collect in your study. We will first assist you in this process through a review of the mission of your institution and an identification of those goal categories or broad areas of inquiry that are relevant to your particular setting. This will enable you to make a clear determination of the purpose of your needs assessment undertaking. Next, we will assist you in identifying appropriate goals for assessment in your undertaking. Finally, we will help you specify comprehensive and sensitive measures for the goals which you have selected. These three processes, each in their own unique way, should help you to determine what information to collect in your needs assessment.

Rationale

As needs assessors, it is important for you to start the needs assessment process with a consideration of who you are, what your institutional mission is, what broad categories or domains of goals you are established to address, or what focus your institution has adopted or will adopt as its basis for building programs for adults. Consequently, your mission should be made explicit at the earliest stages of your needs assessment. Your mission will inform you of the limits within which you will be working because it reflects the direction and emphasis that the institution will place on all activities. In any event, the needs assessment should not be begun without first making a careful review of your institutional mission and all of its ramifications. No needs assessment will make sense before first looking at who you are as the starting point. Looking at the broad domains of

goals which your mission commissions you to attain should enable you to identify the purpose of or the reason for undertaking your needs assessment. The clarification of your purpose for this specific needs assessment will provide you with a definite direction toward which to proceed, because it tells you why you are doing the needs assessment. At times, you may even define your purpose in terms of who will study as well as what you will study. Selection of goal categories relevant to your institutional mission and needs assessment purpose establishes the scope for your study.

After determining the scope of your needs assessment, that is, those goal categories which are relevant to your institutional mission and needs assessment purpose, you want to identify goals for your needs assessment. The identification of goals is a critical second step in the needs assessment process. This identification is essentially the process of giving appropriate focus or refinement to the broad goal categories which were identified previously. This process directs the information collection process toward only those goals that are important to the realization of the identified goal category and at the same time judged to be not sufficiently realized in your particular setting. Focusing only on goals which are assumed to be both important and unrealized will help you to avoid information overload. It also gives you direction for all future activities in the needs assessment process.

Last of all, you may begin to think that a goal should be measurable or capable of being specifically stated in terms of performance. You should be able to describe it in such a way that you can determine

whether or not some desired outcome has been accomplished. In other words, you want to start developing measures for the goals which you have identified. You are right. Without good, solid measures it is difficult to identify the discrepancies between the desired states and the existing states, making the needs assessment process aimless, disjointed and sometimes even counter-productive. It is also important that you insure comprehensive and sensitive measures for the identified goals. This means that you don't want to miss any facets of the goal, and also, that you don't want to have measures that do not contribute to the sensitive measurement of your goals.

Needs assessors should determine scope, and focus of the needs study. They also have to develop measures for the goals identified for the needs assessment undertaking.

Linkage

This booklet aims to orient you about what information to collect in your needs assessment. This is the starting point of every needs assessment undertaking. Following the determination of what information you are going to collect we will lead you into the sources of information, Booklet Two, or, where you are going to go to gather the very best information.

Determining Goal Categories

Concept

To help you get an appropriate scope for your study, you will want to reflect upon those broad areas or categories of goals which comprise, in the aggregate, the missions toward which the educational programs for adults are directed. Some groups, such as the League of Women Voters,

according to their mission, work very diligently to improve the citizenship competence and commitment of women as well as men in our society. Others, like departments of recreation within communities, again in keeping with their mission, work very diligently to build skills and enjoyment in a broad area of recreational pursuits as well as commitment to build strong social ties. Education within the fire and police departments are directed primarily toward improving the vocational competence of all employees and toward assuring the physical well-being of the entire community.

Almost all groups and agencies who work with adults do identify with one or another of several of these broad classes of goals as their part in improving the quality of life for that bit of the world for which they have some responsibility. Together, these goal categories form a marvelous support for the development of adults and their communities. It should be clear now that goal categories refer to broad categories or major areas of human striving.

Thus, goal category is defined as a major area of human striving toward which adult education makes some contribution.

For our purposes there are eight goal categories which represent the total arena of legitimate activities for the field of adult education. They are goal categories which address the various aspects of the life of individual adults: (a) emotional life, like happiness or satisfaction; (b) spiritual life, dealing with ethics or morality; (c) intellectual life, which concerns their active minds or mental skills; (d) physical life, relating to their health and good physical well-being; (e) recreational life, or leisure and self-renewal; (f) vocational life,

which insures employment and productivity in work; (g) social life, which deals with primary relationships or other types of human support; and (h) civic life, which relates to service or social commitment.

Process

To specify the goal categories to be addressed in the needs assessment, we suggest that you give consideration to the following three steps.

First, review for a while the eight goal categories we have just outlined for you. Each of them is basically an organized sector which contributes uniquely to the ultimate goal of improving the quality of human life.

Second, look back to the mission of your institution or educational division within the institution. A mission is a broad statement which shows the rationale for the existence of the entity, what it is intended to achieve for people. It includes its role and range of operation and may further include its programs. In most cases the mission is cited in a very formal written statement in the philosophy or policy section of institutional publications. For that reason, the mission of your institution should be readily available. Next, judge which goal category or goal categories, as listed above, is or are relevant to your mision. In other words, you have to find out which broad categories your mission has identified as its key responsibility for improving the quality of life of adults. Given the example at the beginning of this section, we probably would agree that the Tyler Department of Recreation actually deals primarily with the recreational domain and secondarily with the emotional, physical and social domains of adult life. For another example, suppose that the County Health Department wants to

address their concern for sound nutrition, adequate physical activity and appropriate preventative health care. All this means that the County Health Department is taking the goal category of physical life as its major responsibility.

Last, ask yourself this question: Am I going to address the goal categories covered by my mission, or am I going to explore new missions? If you decide to assess needs on those goal categories within your mission, are you going to address all of them, or are you going to select one or two goal categories to which you have not sufficiently responded? Or, if you want to address some goal categories not covered by your mission, which categories are appropriate? Ultimately you must decide on the scope of your study.

Let's go back to the example of departments of recreation. One department director may decide to assess the needs of the study group in all four goal categories covered by his mission; that is, the emotional, physical, recreational and social domains. In other departments, the director may prefer to concentrate on gathering information related exclusively to the social needs of the adult group.

It is only you who can decide what information you should gather in your needs assessment undertaking. Select those goal categories that you judge appropriate for your needs assessment.

Thus, the Principle for Practice is that needs assessors should select goal categories which are relevant to their institutional mission and needs assessment purpose.

Determining Goals

Concept

In this section, we are going to introduce you to the concept of goal and, in the process, help you to identify what would probably constitute important and unrealized goals for your needs assessment.

Goal is defined as a desired end state which both contributes to the definition and the realization of a goal category. In other words, goals are statement describing a broad intent, state or condition of the areas to be addressed in the needs study. Goals are refinements of the goal category. Further, just as needs assessments should flow from and be tailored to the unique institutions or educational entities undertaking them, so should the goals flow from and be tailored to the goal categories addressed in the needs study. For example, if, as the community college, community service division, we are going to study vocational needs of high school dropouts, one possible goal would be "to improve the prevocational skills" of this target group. Or, if I am involved in vocational and social goal categories as the Local Garment Workers Union director, appropriate goals might include: increasing participation in union activities, or improvement in skills of representing colleagues to management.

A goal is seen as a positive and worthy attainment. Even though words with negative implications such as reduce or eliminate and heart attacks or unemployment are used, the ultimate intent of the goal remains steadfast; namely, to effect positive change. Thus, some examples of health-related goals may be to decrease incidence of teenage pregnancy, to reduce the incidence of employee accidents in the work setting, to increase the level of physical activity of residents in a retirement community, to increase the level of early detection of

glaucoma or to reduce the incidence of alcoholism among women in the home setting. These still constitute goals since they contribute both to the definition and realization of the goal category: quality of physical well-being.

Process

We are going to propose a two-step procedure to help you to develop relevant goals.

In the initial step we suggest that you prepare an extensive listing of goals which contribute either to the definition or realization of each of the goal categories to be addressed in the needs assessment. They should contribute to or facilitate the full attainment of an identified goal category. Further, we suggest that you refine the goals list by eliminating or restating those goals which overlap. You may also want to consider eliminating or restructuring goals that cannot be measured. For example, as the County Mental Health Association Board of Directors, some goals you identify under the category of emotional needs of divorced women may be to improve self-concept, to enlarge the friendship circle, to adjust to a new life role, to develop new interests or hobbies, to reduce dissatisfaction in the present life role or to reduce uncertainty of the future life roles. You may find that the goal of adjusting to a new life role covers what the last two goals indicate. You may also find that "self-concept" in the first goal is difficult to measure. Thus, you might want to rephrase the goal thus: "to think positively of oneself". When you complete this step, you will have produced a listing of discrete and measurable goals.

Secondly, select from the goals list those goals that are of

greatest importance in contributing to the realization or lack or realization of a goal category within the population to be studied. In the above example, the first and third goals would probably have a high priority in terms of the emotional needs of divorced women. Eliminate those goals, if there are any, that are of minor importance to the realization of the goal category. Further, you should eliminate those goals that you judge have been adequately realized already. To conclude, the principle for practice is that needs assessors should identify goals which are both important and unrealized.

Determining Measures

Concept

As mentioned above, in a needs assessment, there is no point dealing with goals that cannot be measured. That means that a goal should allow for specific translation in terms of performance, and the needs assessor must be able to determine whether or not some desired outcome related to a goal category has been accomplished. Thus, it is the purpose of this section to assist you in developing comprehensive and sensitive measures for the goals which you have judged to be both important and unrealized.

Supposing you feel ill and you visit your doctor to find out why you feel poorly. How can your doctor tell whether you are healthy or not? He looks for symptoms; he also looks at a great number of specific measures like blood pressure, pulse, weight, visual acuity, gait, temperature, triglycerides and cholesterol count to name but a few which serve as indicators of health status. In other words, he uses specific physiological measures as a reference point; and he checks these measures

against certain standards or criteria for normalcy in making judgements about your health. The same thing happens in our definition of goals. We need to identify specific measures which would help us to know whether or not goals have been attained.

Thus, measure is defined as an operational statement or indicator for either one dimension of a goal or a complete goal. It is a yardstick that helps you to detect or recognize whether and in what dimension a goal identified for your needs assessment has been attained. Some possible measures for the goal "improving the cardiovascular fitness of the population in the community" would be: first, the number of hours and individual spends on outdoor activities per week, second, the number of days per week a household eats a balanced meal comprising the four basic food groups or third, the number of hours an individual spends sleeping per day.

Process

Now, we are going to propose two activities which should yield comprehensive and sensitive measures for your needs assessment.

First of all, after determining the goals to be addressed in your needs assessment, you will want to explore as many specific measures for each of the goals as possible. The more specifics you can come up with, the more you will be able to tell whether or not the need area as described by the goal statement has been fully realized. For example, if, as the Community Education Director for a suburban independent school district, one goal of your needs assessment is to improve the English language proficiency of Vietnamese immigrants, some possible measures for it might be: the recognition of one hundred of the most

common English words, the recognition of common traffic signs, the ability to express basic requests and responses in English, the ability to speak English with correct intonation and accent, the ability to understand English when spoken at a normal rate and lastly, ability to comprehend what is spoken. Now, ask yourself if you have explored a comprehensive list of measures for English proficiency. You have dealt with some English proficiency skills concerning basic vocabulary, speaking and listening. What about the dimension relating to skills of reading like the ability to read at an eighth grade level or the ability of the student to comprehend what has been read and to interpret the material in his own words? What about the dimension of writing like the ability to summarize what has been read with correct grammar and sentence structure? What about the dimension of life coping skills like the ability to correctly apply for employment or to locate suitable housing for the family or schooling for the children? You see, it is important that you spend some time to review the list of measures to make sure it is comprehensive and that you have not left out any significant dimensions of the goal to be measured.

Next, you may want to select those measures that are sensitive to differences reflected by lapses of time or differences within the population to be studied. If you use voting participation in presidential elections as a measure of the goal of improving the political activism of American citizens, it is a measure that occurs only every four years and thus is not sensitive enough to measure the political activism of American citizens on a day to day basis, it is not sensitive to changes that are occurring over time. Further, if you use the possession of

a high school diploma as a measure for the goal to improve the pre-vocational skills of young adults, age sixteen through twenty-five, it is obvious that this is not a sensitive measure for those in the age group 16-18, or it may not help you identify minority youth who have pre-vocational skills but are still unemployed.

Thus, the principle for practice is that needs assessors should develop measures which insure both comprehensive and sensitive measurement of identified goals.

Summary

In determining what information you should collect in your needs assessment undertaking, you should first determine the goal categories you would like to address in your study. Next, you should develop goals for these goal categories; lastly, you should identify good measures for such goals.

Goal categories are broad classes of goals which represent major areas of human striving. You should be able to identify priority goal categories and select those which are relevant to your mission and to the specific purpose of your needs assessment. By selecting the most relevant goal categories, you set limits or bounds to the scope of your study.

Goal refers to a desired end state which contributes to the definition and realization of a goal category to be addressed in the needs assessment. The goals which you judge to be both important and unrealized should be pursued for study.

Measure is an operational statement for either one dimension of a goal or a complete goal. It is used to quantify a goal. Your

development of comprehensive and sensitive measures will help you to detect whether and to what degree the goals identified for your need assessment have been attained.

After deciding what information to collect for your needs assessment, are you anxious to know who to approach and where to go to gather your needs information? We will orient you to that in the booklet that follows, Booklet Two: Determining Where Information Can Be Found.